Seeds of Survival

The vast majority of seedsavers in South Asia are women.
(IDRC Photo: Daniel Buckles)

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“If it rains, then the crops come. If it doesn’t rain, then there are no crops.”

These are the words of Chinna Narsamma, a farmer who works the thin red soils of India’s Deccan Plateau. Narsamma, like other farmers in her community, copes with the drought-prone climate of southern India by using strategies that have been developed over generations. Traditional farming practices — such as intercropping nitrogen-fixing legumes with soil-building grains or vegetables — coax reliable harvests from the anemic soils. Moreover, staple crops, such as sorghum, known locally as jowar, have been carefully selected to grow on parched land because they require minimal amounts of water and only composted manure for fertilizer. Like most crops, jowar also does double or triple duty serving not only as food for the family, but also as a source fiber for crafts, and fodder for animals.

To safeguard the knowledge that has kept their communities thriving for millennia, the farmers of the Deccan Plateau have woven their intimate understanding of seeds, soils, and seasons into rituals, ceremonies, songs, and dances — it’s one way farmers hand down knowledge to their daughters and sons. In this part of Andhra Pradesh, farming is more than just an occupation: it is an integral part of people’s cultural identity. It is also the economic backbone that links growers, processors, and consumers with landless labourers, artisans, and small business people in a web of interconnected livelihoods.

Organic farming in Canada

Half way around the world from India, the snow-capped mountains of British Columbia’s interior form the backdrop for the 10-acre organic seed and mixed vegetable farm that Patrick Steiner shares and works.

“In the first 20 years of my life I had no experience with agriculture,” he says. “For the last 10 years I have worked the land, trying to understand how life systems work in Canada and how I can share that with my community.”
Steiner is part organic grower, part seed saver, and part social activist. Over the years, he has seen a change in Canadians’ attitudes toward agriculture and the food they eat. Across the country, there has been a steady growth in the organic food market and that has caught the interest of the large-scale agrifood companies currently stocking supermarket shelves. The challenge for small-scale growers, says Steiner, is to find ways of harnessing consumer interest in organic food in order to change the way our food is grown, processed, and distributed.

**A shared future for farmers?**

Two farmers living different realities and facing different futures? Not according to P.V. Satheesh, the Director of the Deccan Development Society a grassroots organization that works with women farmers in the Deccan Plateau. “They may use different mechanics for farming and have different ways of looking at the elements of farming,” he says, “but by and large they [both] represent a kind of a world view of agriculture that places farmers firmly in control of their destinies.”

That world view, he states, is becoming increasingly marginalized as a result of policies developed to promote export-oriented, industrial agriculture — but not to foster local food production by small-scale farmers. At stake, Satheesh maintains, is a way of life that is the cultural and economic backbone of millions of rural communities worldwide.

Local control over food production has become the rallying point for the Deccan Development Society and a group of like-minded organizations that make up the South Asian Network of Food, Ecology, and Culture (SANFEC). Since its inception in 1996, SANFEC has argued for its concerns at national, regional, and international forums such as the World Food Summit, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). In the summer of 2002, with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Inter Pares, a Canadian nongovernmental organization (NGO), they brought their message to Canadian farmers.

In what was dubbed a farmer-to-farmer dialogue, a group of South Asian small-scale farmers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka shared their experiences and the challenges they face with Canadian organic farmers from British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, and Saskatchewan. The 10-day program of tours of organic farms, presentations, and a workshop culminated in the drafting of an alternative vision for the future of agriculture, called *Common Ground*. The statement was presented at the World Congress of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) held in Victoria, British Columbia, in August 2002. SANFEC members then took their message to world leaders attending the WSSD in Johannesburg, South Africa.

**Seeds, soil, and survival**

Chief among the concerns expressed by the 30 or so participants was the need for farmers to have control of seeds by being able to save them and develop new varieties themselves. They were also concerned about the steady erosion of communities and cultures that is taking place as farmers, who are unable to make a living from agriculture, leave the land.

Seeds are especially important to farmers like Begari Laxmamma from Andhra Pradesh. Known as Lakshmi, she, like Steiner, is a seed saver. “I have more than 85 varieties of seeds,” she says. “Every season I lend them to people and then they repay them one-and-a-half times. So my seed quantity continually grows.”
Lakshmi’s skill and knowledge has earned her respect within her community and the surrounding region. It has also helped to keep traditional crop varieties and cropping patterns alive in the face of a movement toward cash cropping.

Cash cropping is an agricultural practice based on growing crops for sale, usually in the export market, rather than growing crops to be consumed at home or sold in local markets.

Cash crop exports to foreign markets allow developing countries to exploit their comparative advantage of cheap labour and cultivated farmland to earn foreign capital and capture a share of global commodity markets. However, while farmers with large farms may be able to create economies of scale and weather price fluctuations on international commodity markets, most smallholders cannot. In the South, three out of four farmers are smallholders. Most cannot afford the expensive petroleum-based fertilizers and chemical pest controls needed to maximize the yield of cash crops.

Cash cropping poses a particular problem for seedsavers, like Lakshmi, because most cash crops are grown from high-yielding hybrid seeds that do not “breed true.” Seeds saved from hybrid varieties will not produce the same high yielding plants in following years. Furthermore, most hybrid seed varieties are protected by patents and other laws. Farmers, therefore, must buy their seed from the patent holders, typically seed companies or state research institutes. Moving the control of seed out the community erodes the status of seedsavers, the vast majority of whom are women. As the demand for traditional seed varieties wanes, they and the knowledge of how best to cultivate them disappears. Across the planet this steady loss of crop biodiversity is narrowing the choices farmers have when it comes to choosing the plants they wish to grow. Ironically, it also reduces options for seed companies and research institutes that rely upon a diverse gene pool to create new crop varieties.

**Canadians’ cautionary tale**

“In British Columbia,” says Canadian organic farmer, John Wilcox, “the distinction is made between community agriculture and industrial agriculture. We have moved away from community agriculture; we have moved away from the soil and from caring for the soil. Industrial agriculture is tied to the city and so the focus is on the city. Demographics have now shifted so that 0.5% [of the population] now cares for the land. We must be the canaries in the coal mine to warn others not to follow this path.”

Farhad Mazhar, Director of the Bangladeshi NGO, Policy Research for Development Alternatives (better known by its Bengali acronym UBINIG) and SANFEC member, sees the farmer-to-farmer dialogue as a critical next step in the work SANFEC has begun in Asia. “This kind of dialogue is very necessary because we must develop a political alliance against the industrialization of our food systems, against the privatization of our Commons. That kind of alliance is extremely necessary.”

Fellow UBINIG member Farida Aktar puts it more succinctly: “I think we have started the ball rolling and the ball will go all around the world.”

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